



## China Perspectives

2009/3 | 2009  
The Deadlock in Tibet

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Lai Hongyi, Lim Tin Seng (eds.), *Harmony and Development: ASEAN-China Relations*, Singapore, World Scientific, 2007. & John Wong, Zou Keyuan, Zeng Huaqun (eds.), *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions*, Singapore, World Scientific, 2006.

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### Édition électronique

URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4874>  
ISSN : 1996-4617

### Éditeur

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

### Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 1 septembre 2009  
ISSN : 2070-3449

### Référence électronique

Claudia Astarita, « Lai Hongyi, Lim Tin Seng (eds.), *Harmony and Development: ASEAN-China Relations*, Singapore, World Scientific, 2007. & John Wong, Zou Keyuan, Zeng Huaqun (eds.), *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions*, Singapore, World Scientific, 2006. », *China Perspectives* [En ligne], 2009/3 | 2009, mis en ligne le 16 octobre 2009, consulté le 28 octobre 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/chinaperspectives/4874>

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- 1 Arguing that relations between the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and China have undergone profound changes since official contacts began more than 15 years ago, the two books *Harmony and Development: ASEAN-China Relations* and *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions* attempt an overview of the evolution of China-ASEAN relations in the last two decades. These books are the result of two symposia organised by the East Asian Institute of the National University of Singapore in December 2004 and 2005 to mark the anniversary of ASEAN-China relations. In the course of analysing the state of the current relationship while stressing the importance of furthering bilateral ties, the contributors cover most of the main topics of the China-ASEAN relationship.
- 2 *Harmony and Development* is divided into three sections. The first contains the opening speeches by senior officials of ASEAN and Singapore retracing the history, the difficulties, and the achievements of China-ASEAN relations since 1991. The second covers issues involving both politics and security, usually considered the top priority areas of cooperation between ASEAN and China since 1991. Finally, the third section

focuses on the implications of the rapid increase in economic cooperation between China and ASEAN over the last 15 years.

- 3 *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions*, on the other hand, attempts to cover some areas that are usually neglected in Asian studies. Although underlining the importance of economic cooperation as a means of gauging the depth of the relationship, this book highlights the legal basis for China-ASEAN cooperation and its achievements in other areas, such as epidemic prevention, anti-piracy cooperation, trans-boundary environmental issues, and conservation and management of fishery and energy resources in the South China Sea. Further, the book is unusual in that its discussion of opportunities in the economic arena does not ignore the problems as well as the advantages linked to implementation of less restrictive border trade regulations, a free trade area, and a reliable scheme of free capital movement. Finally, rather than focusing on the relationship between China and the ASEAN countries as research on ASEAN studies tends to do, *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions* puts greater emphasis on South Korea and Japan's reactions to the deepening of China-ASEAN relations.
- 4 Both books describe the China-ASEAN Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (2002) and the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (2003) as the agreements most influential in strengthening and deepening bilateral relations. It is argued that since 1991, China-ASEAN relations have constantly improved thanks to a joint effort to find innovative and mutually beneficial ways to deal with challenges and move the relationship forward, and the point is made that China should promote mutual trust and understanding through this kind of high-level cooperation rather than focusing on economic cooperation alone. Indeed, while *Harmony and Development* simply reminds the reader that some ASEAN countries harbour lingering suspicions as to the motives and intentions of China's cooperation with the region, *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions* more carefully explains both the hurdles and triumphs China and Southeast Asian countries face in their common challenges. For example, while the fight against epidemics such as SARS and Bird Flu demonstrate the importance and effectiveness of multilateral cooperation at the governmental level, multilateral coordination has proven far less successful in areas such as anti-piracy cooperation, energy resource exploration, trans-boundary environmental issues, and even efforts to liberalise investment. Indeed, finding ways to bridge the divergence of perceptions, incentives, and priorities on these issues has been extremely difficult whenever national interests and sovereignty are at stake.
- 5 In the second part of *Harmony and Development*, Dr. Lai Hongyi reviews the evolution of China's relations with Southeast-Asian nations from the mid-1960s until today. Although predicting that China and Southeast Asian countries will both continue to deepen their cooperation and management of contentious issues, the author recognises that the ups and downs in China-ASEAN relations have been driven by "China's domestic development, [...] ideology, and political and economic geography" (p. XXII). From a completely different perspective, Dr. Sheng Lijun shows that "core ASEAN countries [that is, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand] still have reservations over a rising China and do not want China to disrupt the existing balance of power in the region," as all of them retain strong relations with the West (p. XXIII). In order to expand the scope of the analysis, the next group of contributors consistently discuss China's relations with specific ASEAN countries: Myanmar,

Vietnam, Indonesia, and Laos. These bilateral relations are presented as crucial to understanding the political and security ties between China and ASEAN. Among all these papers, the only chapter presenting a negative scenario is the one on China-Indonesia relations. While other researchers predict a positive future for China's partners, stressing the link between peaceful co-existence and growing economic interdependence, Dr. Ignatius Wibowo Wibisono's interviews with Indonesian government officials and academics stress a more perilous image of China.

- 6 A comparison between the third part of *Harmony and Development* (focusing on the economic implications of China-ASEAN relations) and the chapters covering legal and economic issues in *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions* is useful to better understand the real potential of this cooperation. In *Harmony and Development*, Professor Lu Jianren explores the reasons and regional effects of the rapid growth ASEAN-China bilateral trade has experienced in the last 15 years. According to Professor Lu, the bilateral economic partnership will continue strengthening, as it is providing solid benefits to both parties. The continuing development of ASEAN nations, the strong economic performance of the Chinese economy, regional economic initiatives such as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Area, investment by Chinese enterprises, and Chinese capacity-building are some of the reasons given for the success of bilateral economic integration. Professor Liao Shaolian, however, believes that growing trade and economic interdependence between China and ASEAN, as well as an increase in bilateral investment and population flow are the main results of China's economic growth in Southeast Asia. Finally, as in section two, a number of papers provide an overview of the economic ties between China and various ASEAN countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and the Philippines. In these chapters, China is often described as the catalyst for regional economic integration, with descriptions of when and how the perception of China changed from a negative to a positive image. Generally speaking, all contributors agree that "although some ASEAN countries [...] still harp on the 'China threat' theory and remain sceptical about the intention and motives of a rising China, the greater economic interdependency will continue to ease such fears in the future" (p. XXVIII). Further, it is generally acknowledged that "the sustainability of this partnership is dependent on whether both sides are willing to continue and uphold the present level of cooperation" (p. XXVII).
- 7 By way of contrast, *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions* prefers to emphasise some of the difficulties in multilateral relations between China and Southeast Asian countries. For example, after a review of the legal dimension of this cooperation shows that all documents signed up to now can only be categorised as soft-law, Professor Zheng Lingliang argues that converting these documents into hard-law is essential to consolidate the legal framework of China-ASEAN relations. Further, beyond the general admission of a lack of coordination on issues such as anti-piracy cooperation, energy resources exploration, and trans-boundary environmental issues, the contributions by Professors Zheng Huaqun, Jiangyu Wang, and Chen Huiping usefully stress the importance of turning China-ASEAN economic competition into complementation for the benefit of both sides. Finally, the two chapters examining South Korea and Japan's reactions to the deepening of China's ties in Southeast Asia are also helpful in interpreting their positions towards China's rise. According to Dr. Moon-Soo Chung, the strengthening of China-ASEAN relations may have an indirect but significant impact on the Korean economy, chiefly in the acceleration of industrial restructuring. Further, it is argued that the perception of China and Japan as the two

major economies in the region will push both ASEAN and Korea to cooperate in order to mitigate their impact. Indeed, as Dr. Lam Peng Er confirms, despite the rise of China, Japan will remain an important actor in Southeast Asia: “While China emerges as a regional power underpinned by its strong economic growth, it has yet to exercise diplomatic initiatives in the region to the extent that Japan had” (p. 319). Further, it is affirmed that “in the next 50 years, Japan is likely to remain much more affluent and technologically advanced than China” (p. 324).

- 8 In conclusion, both books are useful tools for tracing the evolution of China-ASEAN relations and understanding the reasons for Southeast Asian nations’ initial concern over the growth of Chinese power and influence in the region. Dr. Lam Peng Er’s views aside, most Asian politicians and scholars identify China as the most dynamic and powerful country in the region. Accordingly, they consider the China-ASEAN relationship, with all its national nuances, as the most important and the one on which further elaboration is needed. However, while the country-to-country approach chosen by *Harmony and Development* is helpful in locating the seeds of the current economic, political, and strategic integration in the wider region, this approach has already been widely used among Asian scholars. *China-ASEAN Relations: Economic and Legal Dimensions*, on the other hand, is able to add more insight to the field by covering the usually neglected areas of legal cooperation, multilateral epidemic prevention, anti-piracy cooperation, trans-boundary environmental issues, and conservation and management of fishery and energy resources. In conclusion, the books share the idea that multilateral cooperation in Asia is mutually beneficial. Even though both ultimately stress the importance of strengthening Asian cooperation, they also appear to be aware that in order for cooperation to be sustainable and effective, all Asian countries will have to accept limitations on their sovereign powers and prerogatives that, at the moment, they do not seem ready to accept. Despite this, Asian scholars continue to be optimistic about the future of the region, convinced that all challenges will eventually be overcome.